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Children’s Literature in Europe at the Start of the 20th Century and the Intellectual Place of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić’s Children’s Story *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića*¹

Ogled / essay

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The essay presents the cultural circumstances and the main ideas of the educational reform in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and gives an overview of the trends found in children’s literature of the time. The author places Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića [The Strange Adventures of Hlapich the Apprentice], a Croatian classic by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, in the tradition of children’s non-fantastic literature of childhood autonomy, of a partly idyllic, partly parabolic, nature. He also relates it to stories by the German children’s author Otfried Preußler, which appeared in the mid 20th century, at the time when Hlapich was translated into German. It is the kind of literature which aims to create for its young readers the feeling of happy agreement between the self and the world, and it thus instils a basic sense of trust in its child readers.

Keywords: children’s literature, Europe, turn of the 20th century, Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, The Strange Adventures of Hlapich the Apprentice

The late 19th century, and especially the turn of the century, was marked by artistic, literary, and pedagogic reform movements in almost all European countries. Ideas about reform surfaced in the field of children’s literature as well, though, admittedly, without influencing the greater majority of publications. The common thread of these reform movements was a rediscovery of childhood, given voice

¹ This essay was presented as an invited talk at the jubilee celebration *Hlapić 2013* at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, on 17 April 2013. This celebration was also the opening ceremony of and the introduction to the International Research Conference *From the Strange to the Wondrous: 100 Years of the Strange Adventures of Hlapić the Apprentice*, which took place in Slavonski Brod, Croatia from 18 to 20 April 2013.

by Ellen Key of Sweden in the proclamation of the Century of the Child.² The theorists of this era referred to many of the theories of childhood from the late 18th and early 19th centuries: what Jean-Jacques Rousseau had suggested in the 18th century, namely that childhood was in its essence entirely misunderstood, was now applied to the bourgeois 19th century – the Belle Époque. The diverse currents of pedagogical reform in the late 19th and early 20th centuries largely consist of a revival of Rousseau's Enlightenment philosophy of childhood: children are fundamentally different from adults and must be respected in this difference. Children see, think, and feel differently from adults. They have their own worldview and their own needs and interests. It was thought that whoever was continuously involved with children ought to accustom themselves unconditionally to children's ways.

Neoromanticism, Fairy Tales and Fantasy Stories for Children

Other currents of reform focused on the Romantic concept of the child from the period around 1800. Following this theory, children were differentiated from adults in that they still had access to a mythic-animistic world view. For children, all natural phenomena were animate and the world was ruled by good and evil spirits. Around 1900, there was renewed interest in taking seriously the idea that children think primitively. People once again began to consider in earnest the child's capacity for enthusiasm for everything wonderful and magical. Around this time, many people returned to the Romantic notion, from around 1800, that traditional, so-called 'folk poetry' best expressed the child's manner of thinking. Admittedly, 'folk poetry' had to be fundamentally reworked in order to be understandable to children. In Germany, for example, Wilhelm Matthießen produced children's versions of traditional fairy tale lore, the first edition of which appeared in 1923 under the title *Das alte Haus. Ein Märchenbuch für Kinder zum Vorlesen* [The Old House: A Fairy Tale Book for Reading Aloud to Children].

Not only did German Romanticism establish so-called 'folk poetry' as children's reading material in the early 19th century, but it also went on to create children's stories in the fantastic mode, exemplarily embodied in the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann. This side of the Romantic programme for children's literature also saw a revival around 1900. England in particular experienced a new blossoming of children's fantasy literature; here it is worth mentioning Lewis Carroll, Edith Nesbit, James Matthew Barrie, Kenneth Graham, and Pamela Travers. Interestingly, Travers's Mary Poppins stories are closely related to E.T.A. Hoffmann's literature of the fantastic. This great variety of children's fantasy literature classics, still

² Her book on education *Barnets århundrade* from 1900 was translated in English in 1909 as *The Century of the Child*.

popular today, put England at the forefront of the development of European children's literature. England continues to have a leading position, which has spread worldwide, not least because of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. Exceptional German children's fantasy stories from this time include Otto Julius Bierbaum's free adaptation of Pinocchio, *Zäpfel Kerns Abenteuer* [Adventures of Zäpfel Kern] from 1905, and Gerdt von Bassewitz's play *Peterchens Mondfahrt* [Peterkin's Trip to the Moon] from 1911.

New Realism

At the turn of the 20th century, however, Germany was primarily taken up with a renewal of realistic children's literature, both in verse and in prose. Essentially, pedagogy reform looked back to the discourse of the concept of childhood of Rousseau and the Enlightenment rather than to the Romantic discourses on childhood. Accordingly, children, too, were led to perceive the world realistically. With these currents of reform, fresh literary demands were brought to bear on children's literature. Richard (1863–1920) and Paula Dehmel (1862–1918) renewed German children's poetry with their collection *Fitzebutze* (1900, illustrated by Ernst Kreidolf). Here, we find the impulsive, uncensored, lyrical self-expression of a child. In Paula Dehmel's *Singens Geschichten* [Singine's Stories] from 1903, published as a book in 1921, we see modern first-person narration by a child: here, the child is the centre of perception and value judgement, and no adult interference occurs. These works by the Dehmels bring back the sort of consistently anti-authoritarian children's literature that had already appeared in the late 18th century. Mention should also be made of Christian Morgenstern, who wrote his children's verses around the turn of the century. These were then collected and published posthumously as *Klein Irmchen* [Little Irma] in 1921. His nonsense poems *Galgenlieder* [Gallows Songs], published in 1905, however, were not considered children's literature until the 1960s.

The turn of the century also saw a revival of the picturebook, especially under the influence of English illustrators such as Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, and Walter Crane. Art Nouveau artists like Ernst Kreidolf, Carl Hofer, Karl F.E. von Freyhold or the Austrians Heinrich Leffler and Joseph Urban were also influential. Furthermore, a two-dimensional drawing style was developed, somewhat reminiscent of children's drawings. All in all, the turn of the century was a period of varied and diverse renewals and one of the most important and productive periods for the development of western European children's literature, not only in England and Germany, as described here, but also in countries like France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and in Scandinavia.

Writing for Middle-Class and Working-Class Children

The underlying rediscovery of childhood and the emphatic turn towards the child reader, however, took very different forms when directed at bourgeois or middle-class children rather than at children from the lower classes, especially working-class children. While the middle classes allowed their children their own sphere of existence, which fundamentally differentiated itself from the world of adults, lower-class children were much more heavily involved in the adult world, an involvement that left them very little free time.

Teachers who committed themselves to reform movements in education wrote sketches and stories about the world of the big city aimed at working-class children just beginning school. On one hand, these stories stayed close to the child's experiential perspective and thus to the principle of starting from the child. On the other hand, they focused attention on the city, the industrial world of work, and the social problems of industrial society. This trend, partly naturalistic and partly tinged with impressionism, started in Germany with Ilse Frappan's *Hamburger Bilder für Kinder* [Hamburg Pictures for Children] (1899), Fritz Gansberg's *Streifzüge durch die Welt der Großstadtkinder* [Exploring the World of the City Children] (1904) and Heinrich Scharrelmann's *Ein kleiner Junge* [A Little Boy] (1908), and culminated in Carl Dantz's penetrating portrait of the circumstances of a working-class boy, *Peter Stoll* (1925).

The theme of the modern metropolis first became mixed up with literature for children of the middle classes during the Weimar Republic. The tradition of big city novels for children often involved plots reminiscent of detective or crime novels; examples include Wolf Durian's *Kai aus der Kiste* [Kai from the Grate] (1927), Erich Kästner's *Emil und die Detektive* [Emil and the Detectives] (1928), *Pünktchen und Anton* [Dot and Anton] (1931), and Wilhelm Matthießen's (1891-1965) *Das rote U* [The Red U] (1932). Here, we are dealing with a children's literature that takes the child's manner of perception as its basis but looks, at the same time, at modern society and the world of adults. Thus, childhood autonomy was partially raised even in the milieu of the bourgeoisie. The social reality of the early 20th century, however, did not allow even the middle classes to keep their children entirely apart from social conflicts. The First World War had already pushed every thought of an autonomous children's world far into the distance. In warring countries like Germany, France, England, and Italy, children became witnesses of a great and terrifying era. They were designated as little patriots who cared about nothing other than their homeland so that, if necessary, they would give their lives for their country. It is not surprising, then, that socially critical

children's literature, meant to prepare young readers for an inharmonious world rife with contradiction, probably reached its peak in the 20th century.

A World of Simplicity – A Children's Literary Vision

A children's literature of childhood autonomy, which gave children a world of their own, existed alongside more modern, socially critical children's literature in the early 20th century. Romantic-fantastic variants of the former were particularly prominent in England, as mentioned above. Further, a non-fantastic variant of children's literature of childhood autonomy developed on the Continent, largely renouncing magical motifs and fantastic elements. This type of modern children's literature from the early 20th century brings us to a classic of Croatian children's literature, the 100th anniversary of which is celebrated this year. In my opinion, Ivana Brlić-Mazuranić's children's story *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* [The Strange Adventures of Hlapich the Apprentice], from 1913, which I know only through the German translation by Else Byhan published in 1959 under the title *Die verschwundenen Stiefel* [The Missing Boots], belongs to this category of literature.

Ivana Brlić-Mazuranić's story presents a world of extreme simplicity, transparency, clarity, and unambiguousness that ideally corresponds to the capacity for understanding among kindergarten and elementary school children. This sort of literature temporarily allows its child audience to forget the sense of being permanently surrounded by a world unintelligible and impenetrable to them. It allows them to enter, if only in fantasy, a world entirely attuned to their manner of thinking, a world in which they can move about with certainty and in which nothing dark or frightening remains. Children see themselves all too often as imperfect, as being not in harmony with their true selves. They have to grow up, to develop, to gain knowledge, to practise new norms of conduct. In other words, children are required to become, permanently, another sort of being entirely. This is too often only a source of unhappiness. The children's literature of childhood autonomy – in both its Romantic and its realistic variants – gives children a sense of identity and of being no longer incomplete but rather with their own sense of wholeness. This is a feeling that our modern, grown-up society fundamentally denies children.

Idyllic Children's Literature in the 20th Century – Unjustly Underestimated and Rarely Treasured

Children's non-fantastic literature of childhood autonomy draws from various European literary traditions beyond merely those of Romantic origin. European

idyllic and bucolic poetry, which flourished in the baroque 17th and enlightened 18th centuries, is of particular importance. The country-rural settings of this style are still present in Brlić-Mažuranić's *Hlapich* story. Outside the realm of folk tales, *Schwänke* (amusing stories, farces) were also influential. The *Kalendergeschichten* (calendar tales) of the 18th and 19th centuries should also be mentioned. This form was brought to a high level of literary development within the German literary tradition by Johann Peter Hebel. I refer particularly to *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* [The Rhinish Family Friend's Treasure Chest] from 1811. The calendar stories were written for a rural population while the *Dorfgeschichten* (village stories) that arose out of this tradition were generally written for an urban population. This beloved genre of story-telling, which reached its height in Germany in Berthold Auerbach's *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten* [Black Forest Village Stories] from 1843, also played a major role in children's literature. Finally, the genre of the parable is worth mentioning. Parables had already achieved importance in the Enlightenment in the 18th century and were still beloved in the Biedermeier. The influence of this didactic genre is easily traceable wherever children's literature of childhood autonomy attempts to be morally instructive. The episodes of *Hlapich* also have an unmistakably morally instructive character: they want to convey exemplary instances of certain social and ethical norms and they do this in a way that will be entirely evident to children.

Looking at the above-named literary traditions, the type of children's literature of childhood autonomy that we are talking about reveals its partly idyllic, partly parabolic character. What the Brothers Grimm in one of their introductions claim for the fairy tale is even more fitting for this type of children's literature:

So einfach sind die meisten Situationen, daß viele sie wohl im Leben gefunden, aber wie alle wahrhaftigen doch immer wieder neu und ergreifend. Die Eltern haben kein Brot mehr und müssen ihre Kinder in dieser Not verstoßen, oder eine harte Stiefmutter läßt sie leiden und möchte sie gar zugrunde gehen lassen. [...] Der ganze Umkreis dieser Welt ist bestimmt abgeschlossen: Könige, Prinzen, treue Diener und ehrliche Handwerker, vor allem Fischer Müller, Köhler und Hirten, die der Natur am nächsten geblieben, erscheinen darin; das andere ist ihr fremd und unbekannt.

They say elsewhere:

Die Märchen also sind [...] dazu bestimmt, den reinen Gedanken einer kindlichen Weltbetrachtung zu fassen, sie nähren unmittelbar, wie die Milch, mild und lieblich, oder der Honig, süß und sättigend, ohne irdische Schwere [...].

As little as these sentences may fit European fairy tale literature, they nonetheless put forward a highly precise theory about the sort of children's literature considered here.

The basic idea of an autonomous children's world, as developed in the 18th and early 19th centuries, by Rousseau and his primarily German followers on one side and by the Romantics on the other, did not survive in the 20th century. Social and political conflict and class struggle, dictators and totalitarian systems, and finally the two World Wars, as well as other devastating wars, made a childhood free of burden and strife impossible. Towards the end of the 20th century, the consumer-goods and media industries affected all areas of life, subjecting childhood to wide-reaching commercialization. Thus, childhood was robbed of independence and light heartedness.

Instilling a Basic Sense of Trust

In my opinion, only the turn of the 20th century and the time after 1945, especially the 1950s and 1960s, can be considered periods when children's literature of childhood autonomy flourished in western European countries. It is no accident, then, that *Hlapich* was translated into German at the end of the 1950s. Indeed, *Hlapich* shows a decided similarity to the classic children's books by Otfried Preußler, especially his *Räuber Hotzenplotz* stories, which were being published contemporaneously. As beloved as the children's books of this recently deceased classic German author still are, they nonetheless seem to function like a message from a long lost era. This fits together well with my reading of *Hlapich*. Such light heartedness, such a whisking away from modern society, with all its conflicts, struggles, and wars, such a happy escape into a world of touching simplicity and straightforwardness!

In the 1970s, this form of children's literature was condemned as an illusionary pretence of a holy, and therefore false, untrue world. The only question that was still asked of children's literature was whether or not it accurately reflected reality. No one considered that this literature had never intended to assert anything about modern social realities. This children's literature aimed at nothing more than the imagining of a pure, poetic world, a world that would be perfectly aligned with the child's manner of thinking and feeling. It aimed to create for its young readers the feeling of a happy agreement between the self and the world. Admittedly, this literature also promoted virtues that now seem specific to an outgrown past and often depicted gender roles that have now become obsolete. Still, this does not affect the heart of the matter: this literature instils a basic sense of trust in its child readers, a trust that children are not easily able to achieve later. In German, this is referred to as *Urvertrauen*. The modern world is too volatile, too torn, too unruly, and too ambivalent to instil such trust. Whoever hopes to be able to bear the instability

of modern life must establish a basic sense of trust during childhood, must gain an elementary belief in the good and the just. Not only mothers and fathers but also children's books, in the style of *Hlapich*, must share in the responsibility of instilling such a sense of trust in children.

Translated from German by Julia Reagen

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Dječja književnost u Europi početkom dvadesetoga stoljeća i intelektualno mjesto dječje priče *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* Ivane Brlić-Mažuranić

Esej prikazuje kulturni kontekst i ideje vodilje obrazovne reforme u Europi početkom dvadesetoga stoljeća te donosi pregled trendova prisutnih u dječjoj književnosti toga vremena. Autor smješta Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića Ivane Brlić-Mažuranić, klasično djelo hrvatske dječje književnosti, u tradiciju ne-fantastične dječje književnosti dječje autonomije, dijelom idiličkoga, a dijelom paraboličkoga značaja. Također to djelo dovodi u vezu s pričama njemačkoga dječjega pisca Otfrieda Preußlera, koje su se pojavile sredinom dvadesetoga stoljeća, u vrijeme kad je Hlapić preveden na njemački jezik. Radi se o vrsti književnosti usmjerenom na to da u mladim čitateljima stvori osjećaj sretnoga sklada između sebe i svijeta te tako u djecu čitatelje ugradi temeljni osjećaj: povjerenje.

Ključne riječi: dječja književnost, Europa, početak dvadesetoga stoljeća, Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića*

Die Kinderliteratur in Europa zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts und die Bedeutung von Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić's Kinderliteraturklassiker *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića*

In dem Essay werden der kulturelle Kontext und die Leitideen zur Bildungsreform in Europa zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts vorgestellt, sowie der damalige aktuelle Stand der Kinderliteratur umgerissen. Den kroatischen Kinderliteraturklassiker Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića von Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić verortet der Autor in der Tradition der nicht-fiktionalen Kinderliteratur, wobei das Werk sowohl idyllische wie auch parabolische Merkmale aufweist. In dem Essay wird sodann das Werk in Beziehung zu den Erzählungen des deutschen Kinderautors Otfried Preußler gebracht, die um die Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts veröffentlicht werden, als Hlapić ins Deutsche schon übersetzt war. In beiden Fällen handelt es sich um eine Art der Kinderliteratur, die darauf ausgerichtet ist, in den Kindern das Gefühl des Einklangs mit der Umwelt hervorzurufen und ihnen damit eine Form von Urvertrauen zu vermitteln.

Schlüsselwörter: Kinderliteratur, Europa, Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts, Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića*